

Scripture Readings:**Psalm 24:1-6**

Psalm 24 is actually a liturgy for those who are entering the Sanctuary for worship. It begins with the declaration that all the earth belongs to God, because God made it and maintains it. The psalmist also recognized that people don't come accidentally, but rather with the hope of seeing God.

*The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.
Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
They will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.
Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.*

Luke 12:32-34, 42-44, 48

Here Jesus acknowledges that we are likely to put our hope in achievements, acquisitions, and assets. Yet, when the lack of fear precedes our fear-driven desires for possessions, purchases, and procurements we might actually be able to imagine treasures beyond self-driven determination, self-assessed success, and self-obsessed security. Being without fear, knowing the source of our treasure — that is, our identity, our worth — makes it possible to be prepared for and an actual participant in God's kingdom.

Jesus said... Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Who, then, is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions.

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required, and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

Sermon:**Lanyards for the Lord**

In the church, stewardship is the word we use mostly around this time of year when we are doing our financial planning for the coming year, assessing our income and our expenses – working towards a 0 balance. As a church we're not in the business of amassing great wealth and with limited sources of income, we cannot operate in the red (with more going out than coming in).

All of this though is the stuff of balancing a budget – not stewardship. Balancing the budget is important, certainly, and we have many competent people here whose efforts are put to managing our finances. Stewardship, however, is something else.

A steward is someone who manages property that is owned by another. When I hear the word “steward” I think of a wine steward – the person who cares for a restaurant’s wine collection.

Christians / church people are also stewards. We manage something – many things actually – that are owned by someone else.

Let’s start with the big picture. The whole universe belongs to God. Psalm 24 says, *The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.* This is not an exaggeration – it’s actually true; the earth belongs to God. After all, God made it. And so it is not ours to wreck or destroy; God has put us here to **manage** it because we **aren’t** the owners.

In the smaller picture, this means a Christian lives as if all private property is really on loan from God. Since it belongs to God, we take good care of what we have and are free to share with God and others. After all, what we think are OUR things, really aren’t ours to begin with.

This is stewardship - believing that everything you own actually belongs to God.

And so we give according to what God has entrusted to us. We heard this in our reading: Jesus says, *From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.* (Luke 12:48)

And so, a biblical understanding of giving doesn’t ask, “how much does the church need?” but rather, “how much is God asking me to give?”

The story goes about a beggar by the roadside who asked for alms – a handout - from Alexander the Great as he passed by. The man was poor and wretched and had no claim upon the ruler, no right even to lift a hand to him. Yet the Emperor threw him several gold coins. A courtier was astonished at his generosity and commented, "Sir, copper coins would adequately meet a beggar's need. Why give him gold?" Alexander responded, "Cooper coins would suit the beggar's need, but gold coins suit Alexander's giving."

Now Alexander the Great was not a Christian, (he died hundreds of years before Jesus was born,) but this story demonstrates what Jesus said – that to whom much is given, much is required.

And Christian stewardship is based on the fact that “much has been given” to us. Right? Sometimes I wonder... Can we ever thank God enough for not only material things – but for the giving of his Son for us? Probably not.

I want to share with you a favorite poem of mine which gets at this notion of receiving much and what we offer in return. It’s by Billy Collins, (professor at Lehman College, CUNY) and was the Poet Laureate of the US from 2001 – 2003.

The Lanyard

The other day I was ricocheting slowly
 off the blue walls of this room,
 moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
 from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
 when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
 where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
 could send one into the past more suddenly—
 a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
 by a deep Adirondack lake
 learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
 into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
 or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
 but that did not keep me from crossing
 strand over strand again and again
 until I had made a boxy
 red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
 and I gave her a lanyard.
 She nursed me in many a sick room,
 lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
 laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
 and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,
 and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
 Here are thousands of meals, she said,
 and here is clothing and a good education.
 And here is your lanyard, I replied,
 which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
 strong legs, bones and teeth,
 and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
 and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.
 And here, I wish to say to her now,
 is a smaller gift—not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
 but the rueful admission that when she took

the two-tone lanyard from my hand,
 I was as sure as a boy could be
 that this useless, worthless thing I wove
 out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

I like this poem as a stewardship poem because from a Christian perspective it gets it right in a big way. It also gets it wrong – specifically in the last line – that the giving of the lanyard would be enough to make us even. In our relationship with God, we are never even; and there is always the sense that there's always something more we can do or give.

But it gets it right in a “Psalm 24” kind of way, in that what we offer in response to what God has done for us is so small, and yet we give it anyway. The point is what is in our hearts in the giving. Billy Collins never could have made the lanyard for his mother had she not given him life and love, what any mother would do for their child.

Similarly, we give our lanyards to God because of the relationship we have with God, not because we're counting and keeping track of what He's done for us, or what the church has done for us, but because God has made us and loves us beyond what words could say.

And we know God's love primarily through the church. Through the relationships here which are based in Christ. As we pray for one another, or deliver meals when someone is recovering, or receive an encouraging word or a listening ear.

What if we understood ourselves to be stewards not just of the material goods we have, but of the love of God as well.

Here's one more story about the blessings of being generous:

In the early 1900's there were once two young men working their way through Stanford University. Their funds had gotten desperately low, and one of them got the idea to invite the famous pianist Paderewski to play a piano recital and use the profits for their tuition and board.

The great pianist's manager asked for a guarantee of two thousand dollars. The students, undaunted, proceeded to stage the concert. They worked hard, only to find that the concert had raised only sixteen hundred dollars. After the concert, the students went to Paderewski and told him of their efforts and results.

They gave him the entire sixteen hundred dollars, and accompanied it with a promissory note for four hundred dollars, explaining that they would earn the amount at the earliest possible moment and send the money to him.

"No," replied Paderewski, "that won't do." Then tearing the note to shreds, he returned the money and said to them: "Now, take out of this sixteen hundred dollars all of your expenses, and keep for each of you 10 percent of the balance for your work, and let me have the rest."

Well the years rolled by – and much had changed in the world. It was WWI and Paderewski was the head of the Polish National Committee in Paris (later he would become Prime Minister of Poland.) During the war, Paderewski lead relief agencies based in London and elsewhere as he sought to feed the starving thousands of his beloved Poland. He relied on his political and social contacts around the world to obtain thousands of tons of food which poured into Poland during these devastating years.

After the starving people were fed, Paderewski journeyed to Paris to thank Herbert Hoover for the relief he had sent him. Hoover was a businessman at the time, also working in Europe to provide food relief for those suffering from the war.

"Of course, Mr. Paderewski," was Mr. Hoover's reply. "Besides, you don't remember it, but you helped me once when I was a student at college, and I was in need."

Again, I don't know that Paderewski and Hoover were Christians. It doesn't really matter.

What matters is that we are Christians and that this is our church. Here's another definition of stewardship:

Stewardship is everything you do after you say 'yes' to Jesus.

We don't really know what will become of our offerings here – sure the bills will be paid, supplies will be purchased, staff will receive salaries – but the point is that great things will grow from these ordinary acts in ways we can't even imagine.

And so like Billy Collins, we go to camp or to work, and we make our lanyards, and we offer them to the Lord.

Sure, that at the same time it is not enough and yet somehow it is.
Amen.